

MONO COUNTY GENERAL PLAN DRAFT EIR



SECTION 7

SIGNIFICANT ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

7.0 INTRODUCTION AND CEQA REQUIREMENTS

CEQA Guidelines §15126 requires that an EIR consider all phases of a project when evaluating potential impacts on the environment, including planning, acquisition, development and operation. As part of this analysis, the EIR must also identify a) significant environmental effects of the proposed project, b) significant environmental effects that cannot be avoided if the proposed project is implemented, c) significant irreversible environmental changes that would be involved in the proposed project should it be implemented, d) growth-inducing impacts of the proposed project, e) mitigation measures proposed to minimize significant effects, and f) alternatives to the proposed project. CEQA Guidelines §15126 recommends that these subjects be addressed in separate sections or paragraphs of the EIR and also requires, where the subjects are not discussed separately, that a Table be provided to show where each subject is discussed. This EIR discusses each subject separately in the sections listed below in Table 7-1:

TABLE 7-1: LOCATION WHERE LONG-TERM SUBJECTS ARE DISCUSSED	
SUBJECT	EIR SECTION
Significant Environmental Effects of the Proposed Project	§7.1
Significant Environmental Effects that Cannot be Avoided if the Proposed Project is Implemented	§7.1
Significant Irreversible Environmental Changes	§7.2
Growth-Inducing Impacts of the Proposed Project	§7.3
Mitigation Measures Recommended to Minimize Significant Effects	§2.0 (Executive Summary)
Cumulative Effects	§5.0
Alternatives to the Proposed Project	§6.0

7.1 POTENTIALLY SIGNIFICANT EFFECTS & UNAVOIDABLE SIGNIFICANT EFFECTS

TABLE 7-2: POTENTIALLY SIGNIFICANT PROJECT IMPACTS		
EIR SECTION & SUBJECT	POTENTIALLY SIGNIFICANT EFFECTS	SIGNIFICANT & UNAVOIDABLE?
§4.1 Land Use	Physically Divide a Community	No
	Conflict with an Applicable Land Use Plan	No
§4.2 RTP and Circulation	Conflict with Circulation Planning	No
	Conflict with Congestion Management Program	No
	Cause Changes in Air Traffic Patterns	No
	Result in Inadequate Emergency Access	No
	Conflict with Transit Bike, Parking, Pedestrian plans	No
§4.3 Air Quality & Greenhouse Gases	Conflict with Applicable Air Quality Plan	No
	Violate an Air Quality Standard	No
	Expose Sensitive Receptors to Pollutants	No
	Create Objectionable Odors	No

	Conflict with Applicable GHG-Reduction Plan	No
§4.4 Biological Resources	Impact Candidate, Sensitive or Special Status Species	✓
	Impact Riparian Habitat	✓
	Impact Federally Protected §404 Wetlands	✓
	Interfere with Fish or Wildlife Movement or Migration	✓
	Conflict with Local Biological Protection Ordinances	✓
	Conflict with an adopted Habitat Conservation Plan	No
§4.5 Geology	Exposure of people & structures to seismic effects	✓
	Cause substantial soil erosion	✓
	Exposure of people & structures to unstable geology	✓
	Soils unsuited to alternative wastewater systems	No
	Loss of mineral resources	✓
§4.6 Health & Safety Hazards	Potential for Release of Hazardous Materials	✓
	Activities on Known Hazardous Materials Sites	No
	Exposure to airport hazards	No
	Inadequate emergency response	✓
	Exposure to wildland fire risks	✓
	Exposure to avalanche, rockfall, storms, volcanism	✓
§4.7 Cultural Resources	Impacts to prehistoric or historic resources	✓
	Impacts to Paleontological Resources	✓
	Impacts to Sacred Lands	✓
§4.8 Hydrology	Violation of Water Quality Objectives	✓
	Violation of Waste Discharge Requirements	✓
	Availability of adequate Water Supplies	✓
	Erosion and Siltation from altered Drainage	✓
	Exposure of People and Structures to 100-year Flood	No
	Risk of Dam Failure	No
	Risk of Seiche and Tsunami	No
§4.9 Recreation	Increased demand for Recreational Facilities	No
	Impacts upon Recreational Facilities	✓
§4.10 Aesthetics, Light & Glare	Impact Scenic Resources in a State Scenic Highway	✓
	Degrade Visual Character or Quality	✓
	Create New Sources of Light and Glare	✓
§4.11 Agriculture	Convert Prime Farmland to Nonagricultural Use	No
	Result in Loss of Forest Land	No
§4.12 Population	Cause Significant Population Growth	No
	Displace Residents or Housing	No
§4.13 Utilities & Public Services	Impacts on police, fire, schools, other services	✓
	Result in Wasteful, Inefficient Energy Consumption	No
	Adequacy of landfill capacity	No
§4.14 Noise	Cause a Significant Increase in Ambient Noise Levels	No
	Expose People to Groundborne Vibration or Noise	No
	Expose People to Significant Airport Noise	No

7.2 SIGNIFICANT IRREVERSIBLE ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES

Development in accordance with the Draft Mono County *RTP/General Plan* and related planning initiatives would result in the consumption of nonrenewable resources. This use would have an irreversible effect on such resources. Resources anticipated to be irreversibly committed over the life of the General Plan include, but are not limited to, lumber and other related forest products; sand, gravel, and concrete; petrochemicals; construction materials; steel, copper, lead, and other metals; and water supplies. If groundwater production exceeds safe yield (which is not known for most Mono County

groundwater basins), there would be a potential for irreversible land subsidence and loss of groundwater storage capacity. Some of the changes in fire behavior and fire risk associated with development at the wildland/urban interface may be irreversible, as well as associated changes in forest ecology. Some of the long-term changes in habitat, habitat connectivity, and viability of plant and animal species may be irreversible. Loss of cultural resources may be irreversible. In identifying the potentially irreversible changes above, it is again noted that the level of development associated with the proposed *General Plan Land Use Element* is the same as or lower than what would be allowed under the existing adopted *General Plan*, and numerous policies and regulations are proposed that would mitigate impacts to the extent feasible. Thus while General Plan implementation may result in the irreversible impacts described herein, the impacts would in all cases be relatively less significant with the proposed changes.

7-3 GROWTH-INDUCING EFFECTS

CEQA §15126.2(d) requires that an EIR discuss ways in which the project could foster economic growth or population growth, or the construction of additional housing, including projects that may remove obstacles to population growth and activities that may encourage and facilitate other activities with potentially significant effects.

The current proposed General Plan Land Use Element would yield maximum build-out housing and population levels much higher than were present as of the 2010 Census, but approximately the same as would be allowed with the existing 2001 General Plan. As detailed in EIR §4.1, the proposed General Plan Land Use Element update does not re-designate any open space lands for development (except for lands in the Conway Ranch area that are currently designated for development would be redesignated as open space), nor does it allow for major new infrastructure projects that would divide existing neighborhoods and thereby create potential for long-term land use divisions associated with growth. The changes proposed to the General Plan Land Use Element are largely the result of enhanced mapping tools, better characterization of uses and, most significantly, revisions to the uses allowed at Conway Ranch. Repeal of the Conway Ranch Specific Plan would re-designate approximately 855 acres of land currently designated as Specific Plan (as shown in the 2001 General Plan) to Open Space; an additional three acres of land currently developed with single-family homes would be re-designated from Specific Plan to Single Family Residential.

With respect to economic development, the Draft *RTP/General Plan Update* seeks to increase tourism in Mono County. Among the related planning initiatives is a *Draft Economic Development Strategy* that would, if successful, increase tourism over current levels and also above the levels that would be achieved under the existing *General Plan*. The *Draft Economic Development Strategy* notes that tourism accounts, directly or indirectly, for fully 83% of existing employment in Mono County. However, the *Strategy* notes areas for potential improvement in tourism and the economy generally. Most notably, the *Strategy* identifies several distinct segments of the Mono County population including disproportionately large populations among the young and the old, among high- and low-earning residents, and among educated and uneducated residents. The *Strategy* recommends skills training and supplemental education to narrow the education gap, and steps to strengthen tourism and travel spending to more reliably support the large employment base devoted to tourism.

The Town of Mammoth Lakes is the largest contributor to tourism, accounting for 77% of revenues. Bridgeport is second largest (7.1% of revenues), followed by June Lake (5.9%), and Lee Vining (4.3%). Each of the unincorporated communities has a somewhat unique tourism identity: Bridgeport serves as a gateway to Bodie, June Lake is known as a ski resort, Lee Vining is associated with Mono Lake and the eastern entry into Yosemite, and Coleville is recognized as gateway to the Walker River and outdoor activities. The *Strategy* assesses tourism and economic development challenges and opportunities. Challenges include the remote location and seasonal access limitations of Mono County particularly for visitors coming from northern California. The County was also strongly impacted by the economic recession, which occurred in tandem with sharp reductions in discretionary spending. The report found that local employees may not have the skills most needed to support a strong economy, and noted the difficulty of sustaining year-round employment given the marked variation in season tourist demand. Other challenges included the constrained budget available for marketing, and the limitations associated with the fact that 95% of all Mono County land is publicly owned.

In assessing opportunities, Mono County's efforts to obtain the National Scenic Byway designation for US 395 was seen as the single-most-important element overall. Increased public interest in outdoor recreation was also seen as a

substantial strength. The *Strategy* identified closure of the June Mountain Ski Area (since reopened) as an opportunity to rethink the strategic direction of the June Lake community, and recommended repositioning economic development as a higher priority to offset forecast weakness in the future market for skiing and snowboarding. Enhanced air service was identified as a critical step for providing access to a wider tourist market, and the Digital 395 corridor was identified as a unique opportunity for attracting new small businesses and telecommuting as well as strengthening the existing business sectors. Overall, the *Strategy* emphasized a regional approach to economic development wherein Mono County would collaborate with the Town of Mammoth Lakes, Inyo County, Bishop and local Native American tribes to promote eastside attractions, leverage resources, and focus on the unique assets and needs of each area. The report identifies 11 broad economic development strategies including:

- Make economic development a priority throughout the county;
- Expand tourism and marketing efforts;
- Integrate Digital 395 into the local communities;
- Secure the US 395 National Scenic Byway designation;
- Provide education, training and resources to help retain and expand current businesses;
- Be a catalyst for business idea sharing and networking;
- Continue to streamline the County's permitting process and review ways to simplify the approval process;
- Develop regional food systems over the long term;
- Develop targeted business attraction;
- Identify funding sources to support the economic development strategy; and
- Develop a regional economic development corporation.

Specific actions are recommended for each strategy. The action recommendations are structural in nature and focus on increased marketing budgets, new hiring positions, regional interagency outreach, periodic collaboration meetings, public and agency education, assistance in obtaining grant funding, capacity development through websites and mobile sites and promotion of assets and expanded air service, training programs, brand development, creation of a small business center offering loans and technical assistance, interdepartmental review of policies and regulations, increased advertising for buying local food products and support for agriculture and small farming, inventorying assets, and developing targeting marketing and recruitment strategies.

None of the recommended economic development actions would have potential to directly impact environmental conditions in Mono County, and the *Strategy* does not identify specific targets for increased tourism or tourism expenditures. The report does note, however, that annual occupancy of Mono County lodging is about 51% annually, with summer occupancy at 73%, autumn at 42%, winter at 30% and spring at 33.9%. A 2009 report prepared by the Mono County Tourism Commission¹ estimated total visitation at 1.5 million visitors annually; of this total, 64% stayed overnight and 88% of that group stayed in paid lodging. When coupled with the occupancy rates identified in the *Strategy* report, the County's data would suggest that the 51% occupancy represented about 845,000 visitors. Visitation can be expected to increase in proportion to the extent the County is successful in achieving the economic development goals and recommendations, and there is some evidence of a relationship between tourism and population growth.^{2 3}

EIR §4.9 (Recreation) notes that many components of the current *Draft RTP/General Plan Update* seek to increase tourism, increase the use of existing recreational facilities, and to expand the number and range of recreational opportunities in coming years. In addition to the *Draft Economic Development Strategy*, supportive policies and actions are evident in the Outdoor Recreational section of MEA, the *Draft Open Space and Conservation Element*, the *Draft Land Use Element*, the *Draft RTP*, the proposed Eastern Sierra Regional Trail system, the proposed Gateway Trail System, the proposed Scenic

¹ Mono Co. Tourism Commission, *Economic Impacts and Profile of Mono County Visitors*, February 27, 2009. Accessed at http://monocounty.ca.gov/sites/default/files/fileattachments/planning_division/page/402/economicimpactpresentation.pdf

² Proenca, S; Soukiazis, E., *Tourism as an economic growth factor: a case study for Southern European countries*, 2015. Researchgate website: http://www.researchgate.net/publication/228629558_Tourism_as_an_economic_growth_factor_a_case_study_for_Southern_European_countries

³ Galapagos Conservancy, *Tourism and Population Growth*, 2015. Galapagos Conservancy website: <http://www.galapagos.org/conservation/tourism-growth/>

Byways Plan and Main Street Revitalization efforts. The analysis provided in §4.9 notes that recreation has potential for significant adverse impacts on a wide range of resources including damage to plants, displacement of soil organisms, compaction of soils, nutrient loading, introduction of non-native invasive plant species, habitat fragmentation and edge effects, changes in bird behavior and nesting and movement, microclimate changes, increased fire risk, erosion, degraded water quality, improper disposal of wastes, changes in the life cycle and populations of native fish and macro-invertebrates and zooplankton, and impacts to human populations including safety, congestion and reduced livability of local communities (among others).

Mono County has in the past and will continue to proactively manage resources for sustainability, and the *Draft RTP/General Plan Update* and related planning actions contain numerous policies and actions that will further reduce the adverse impacts of tourism and recreational development on the environment. The analyses provided in EIR §4.9 as well indicate that these preventive and mitigating activities will reduce the impacts of recreational development on the environment, but not to a level that is less than significant; the same conclusion applies to the potentially significant adverse effects associated with economic development as outlined in the *Draft Economic Development Strategy* and other plans associated with the proposed *Draft RTP/General Plan Update*.